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Editorial

## **Humanity as a Contested Concept: Relations between Disability and ‘Being Human’**

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### **Abstract**

This editorial presents the theme and approach of the themed issue “Humanity as a Contested Concept: Relations between Disability and ‘Being Human’”. The way in which the concept of humanity is or must be related to disability is critically investigated from different disciplinary perspectives in the themed issue, which is, moreover, situated in the field of disability studies and related to discussions about posthumanism. The argument is made that humanity is a concept that needs to be constantly reflected upon from a disability studies perspective. Finally, the contributions of the themed issue are briefly outlined.

### **Keywords**

ableism; disability; humanity; posthumanism

### **Issue**

This editorial is part of the issue “Humanity as a Contested Concept: Relations between Disability and ‘Being Human’”, edited by Paul van Trigt (Leiden University, The Netherlands), Alice Schippers (Disability Studies in Nederland, The Netherlands) and Jacqueline Kool (Disability Studies in Nederland, The Netherlands).

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### **1. Theme**

What does it mean to be human? This question is discussed on an almost daily basis although not always explicitly. Discussions about medical technologies, doping, old age, human rights, and animal rights highlight how concepts such as human and human dignity are contested. Furthermore, they reveal the role played by implicit norms around humanity and its related concepts. Our themed issue will explore and stimulate these discussions by investigating how, by whom, where, and why the concept of humanity was, is, and can be used. This means that we do not investigate what humanity really is, but how and why the concept of humanity is or can be constructed in different situations (cf. Asad, 2015; Mol, 2012).

Humanity is often taken for granted, in both daily life and scientific research. In this project we critically approach the concept of humanity through a disability studies perspective. Humanity and disability are (possibly) related in numerous ways. Historically, as argued by Hans Joas (2013), development of the notion of individual human dignity was linked to processes of defining groups (including the so-called ‘feeble minded’) as those that must be included in the human species. Today, we often observe that discourse about human dignity and borders of the human race are determined by the notion that disability leads to reduced quality of life. Also, recent debates about human enhancement are often related to people with disabilities who, for a considerable period of time, have been using devices to ‘enhance’ their human bodies (cf. Harnacke, 2015).

## 2. Approach

By addressing relations between humanity and disability, our themed issue will not only contribute to understanding the ways people with disabilities are and were included in and excluded from the concept of humanity. It also makes a contribution to the ongoing debates in the field of disability studies about the value of a posthuman approach and the plea for a posthuman disability studies (Goodley, Lawthom, & Runswick-Cole, 2014; Vandekinderen & Roets, 2016). The development of the multidisciplinary field disability studies since the 1970s would be unthinkable without the social model of disability. With this model, in which disability is in the first place a social construct and problem created by society, activist scholars tried to replace the medical and individual model of disability. Meanwhile, the field is enriched by other models and approaches (Winance, 2016).

Recently, Rosi Braidotti's book *The Posthuman* (2013) inspired scholars to argue for a posthuman disability studies. Goodley et al. (2014) have argued that disability studies is 'perfectly at ease' with the posthuman in criticizing the ideal of humanity that was 'implicitly assumed to be masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen of a recognised polity' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 65). They appreciate Braidotti's aim not only to 'destabilise humanist man', but also to look for alternatives 'in response to the oppressive nature of humanism' and to rethink 'our relationships with our environments, our world and human and non-human inhabitants of our planet' (Goodley et al., 2014, pp. 343–345).

We have no need to position ourselves as posthuman disability scholars, but we are inspired by the aim to 'destabilise humanist man'. Therefore, we investigate humanity as a contested concept and we approach humans as embedded in a network of relations between humans and non-humans. Of course this approach is not reserved to the posthuman approach. In the last decade, disability studies in general have tended to contest 'the normativity of the Western autonomous subject' in favour of 'the notion of relational autonomy', which 'designates the idea that autonomy is conditioned by the social relations in which individuals are embedded' (Winance, 2016; cf. Meininger, 2011). The family and similar biological and social units, for example, have been explored as an intersection of the individual and the group in terms of what makes us human and how we ascribe meaning (Zuna, Brown & Brown, 2014; Solomon, 2012).

As will become clear in our themed issue, we tend to understand the posthuman condition as one in which we constantly reflect on humanity rather than as a condition beyond humanity. In that sense we think the concept dis/ human of Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014) is very helpful. This concept can be used to (a) dis the human because 'disability has the radical potential to trouble the normative, rational, independent, autonomous subject that is so often imagined when the human is

evoked', but also to (b) assert the human, because people with disabilities 'seek to be recognised as human'. This is in line with disability studies as dis/ability studies, that on the one hand acknowledge the struggle to be able with a disability and on the other hand criticize the ideal of ableism and rethink 'ideas that we might have taken for granted' (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2014, pp. 2–4). Dis/ability studies recognize the norm and seek to trouble the norm.

Relating our themed issue to posthumanism has also to do with our ambition to contribute from a disability studies perspective to research that lacks such a perspective. We not only want to add disability to mainstream analytical categories like gender, class, and race, but also address the intersection of these categories (cf. Erevelles, 2011). The research tradition of posthumanism enables this and allows disability studies to be part of a broader movement that develops alternatives for the often dominant 'humanist man' (cf. Braidotti, 2013; Butler, 2015). This themed issue is a result of a project which was initiated and managed by the foundation Disability Studies in the Netherlands and in which we give a broader perspective by working with a mix of scholars from inside and outside the field of disability studies.

We want our issue to enrich the ongoing debates in at least two ways. In the first place, our choice to investigate humanity as a contested concept enables the development of a balanced assessment of the way this concept stimulates or not the inclusion of people with disability. As has already been mentioned, we understand the posthuman condition as one in which we constantly reflect on humanity, rather than as a condition beyond humanity. Secondly, the issue is innovative in approaching humanity as a contested concept from a broad range of disciplines (including cultural analysis, care ethics, health science, theatre studies, history) and with different, explicitly explained methods. With the reflection on humanity and our methods we try to take into account objections to posthuman and critical disability studies concerning normativity and methods (Vehmas & Watson, 2016).

## 3. Content

We start our issue with two contributions that address the ways in which humanity and related concepts like equality are or can be used to in- or exclude people with disabilities. In their commentary Gustaaf Bos and Doortje Kal (2016) discuss whether and, if so, how the idea of equal humans stimulates the inclusion of people with severe disabilities. Fiona Budge and Harry Wels (2016) discuss in their article the desire to be included in humanity and explore how space can be created in society for and by people with an intellectual or developmental disability. These two pieces show, each in their own way, how the usefulness of the concept humanity is highly determined by specific contexts.

In the following three articles we explore how normative notions of humanity can be criticized or dismantled.

In the third article Sofia Apostolidou and Jules Sturm (2016) show how fat subjects were problematized by both biopolitical and posthuman standards. Carolien Hermans (2016) argues in the fourth article how the dance of people with disabilities enables new ways of being human. Alistair Niemeijer and Merel Visse (2016) argue in the fifth article that auto-ethnography enables the integration of (private) experiential knowledge of an illness or disability into scientific debates about (public) care, which is often based on 'normal' humans. These three articles show how dominant concepts of humanity can be challenged.

In the last two articles alternative approaches to humanity and disability are explored. Lieke Kuiper, Minne Bakker and Jacques van der Klink (2016) present in the sixth article a framework to investigate which values and conceptualizations of humanity play a role in the position of people with disabilities in the labour market. In the last article, Paul van Trigt and Susan Legêne (2016) develop, inspired by Actor-Network Theory, a new interpretation of historical photos of people with disabilities in the colonies beyond the dominant humanitarian narrative. In so doing, they underline the most important insight of this themed issue: disability not only contests humanity, but teaches us how humans are related to each other and to non-humans—whether we like it or not.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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**Jacqueline Kool** holds an MA in Theology and was trained as a social worker. She is one of the founders of Disability Studies in the Netherlands and currently serves as the organisation's knowledge manager. She has served as a writer, trainer, and consultant in the disability advocacy and policy fields in the Netherlands for over 20 years. Kool's work centres on disabled people's belonging and participation, and representations of the disabled body. Her work reflects a commitment to integrate theoretical perspectives with the lived experience of disability.



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